DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 058 935 PS 005 170

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TITLE The Construction of Personality: Some Facts and Fantasies about Cognition and Social Behavior.
PUB DATE 3 Sep 71
NOTE 29p.; Paper presented at the 79th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C., September 3-7, 1971

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Theories; *Cognitive Processes; *Personality Theories; *Psychology; *Social Behavior

ABSTRACT

Fundamental assumptions regarding the nature of personality are discussed in relation to the various approaches or theories of personality assessment. These approaches are the Dispositional and the Specificity Theory. The Dispositional Approach is discussed as to assumptions and the empirical status of the assumptions. Some implications of specificity theory are presented in regard to common misconceptions, specificity and consistency in behavior, moderator variables and subject-condition interactions, from disposition to behavior: the social behaviorist's trip, and from behavior to disposition: the subject's trip. A number of references is provided. (DB)

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The Construction of Personality:

Some Facts and Fantasies About

Cognition and Social Behavior*

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Many of the therapeutic implications of social behavior theory have become gratifyingly evident in the last few years. Guided by behavior theory, there have been notable advances in treatment techniques, as well as significant reconceptualizations of the treatment process itself (e.g., Bandura, 1969). These exciting developments are just starting to be accompanied by comparable parallel developments in personality theory. In the past, there has been a curious--indeed, an alarming--bifurcation between progress in behavior change and in conceptualizations regarding the basic nature of personality. Even severe critics of behavior modification have begun to recognize its efficacy. But while it has been widely conceded that behavior changes when conditions are systematically changed, until recently in the view of many psychologists, "personality" somehow has remained immune.

During the last forty years, when basic concepts were changing rapidly in most fields of psychology, the most fundamental assumptions about the nature of personality seem to have been retained with few substantial modifications. Of course there have been many changes in the names and particular characteristics of the dispositions advocated by different theoreticians and personality researchers in the last few decades. But in

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*Address of the Chairman, Section III (Development of Clinical Psychology as an Experimental-Behavioral Science) Division 12, American Psychological Association, Washington, D. C., Sept. 3, 1971.

spite of the heterogeneity of hypothesized dimensions or structures, the fundamental assumptions about them have remained almost monolithic.

Dispositional Approach to Personality

Assumptions of Traditional Dispositional Theories

It has generally been assumed that personality dispositions or traits--the basic units--are relatively stable, highly consistent attributes that exert widely generalized causal effects on behavior. Whether one uses the language of traits, or of habits, or of basic attitudes, or of dynamics and character structure, this fundamental assumption has been shared: personality comprises broad underlying dispositions which pervasively influence the individual's behavior across many situations and which lead to consistency in his behavior (e.g., Allport, 1937).[1] Guided by this assumption, personality research has been a quest for such underlying broad dimensions, for basic factors, or for pervasive motives, or for characteristic life styles.

In personality assessment the trait assumptions regarding structure are seen in the existence of literally hundreds of tests designed to infer dispositions and almost none to measure situations. The same belief in global traits that manifest themselves pervasively is perhaps best seen in the projective test assumption that responses to vague or minimal stimuli will reveal individual differences in fundamental generalized dispositions (MacFarlane & Tuddenham, 1951).

Empirical Status of Assumptions

Given the pervasiveness of the consistency assumption of dispositional personality theory its empirical status becomes especially important. There have been several recent reviews of that evidence, (e.g., Mischel, 1968; 1969;

Peterson, 1968; Vernon, 1964). The volumunious data cannot be summarized adequately here but several themes emerge. To recapitulate briefly, impressive consistencies often have been found for intellective features of personality, and for behavior patterns such as cognitive-styles and problem-solving strategies that are strongly correlated with intelligence (e.g., Witkin, 1965). Consistency also is often high when people rate their own traits, as in questionnaires and other self-reports (e.g., E. L. Kelly, 1955). Temporal continuity also has been demonstrated often when the individual's behavior is sampled at different time periods but in similar situations. When one goes beyond cognitive variables to personality dimensions, and when one samples personality by diverse methods and not just by self-report questionnaires, the data change and undermine the utility of inferring global personality dispositions from behavioral signs for most assessment purposes, as has been documented in detail (Mischel, 1968).

Hunt in 1965, reached an essentially similar conclusion. He said:

> ...individual differences have been conceived typically after the fashion of static dimensions and have been called traits. Those who have attempted to measure personality traits, however, have all too often found even the reliability and validity coefficients of their measures falling within a range of 0.2 and 0.5. If one takes the square of the coefficient of correlation as a rough, 'rule-of-thumb' index of the proportion of the variance attributable to persons, it would appear to be limited to somewhere between 4 and 25% of the total. This is incredibly small for any source which is considered to be <u>the</u> basis of behavioral variation, but we personologists have blamed our instruments rather than our belief in the importance of static dimensional traits....(Hunt, 1965, p. 81).

Empirical evidence concerning instability and inconsistency in behavior usually has been interpreted as due to the inadequacies of the tests and measures, faulty sampling, and the limitations of the particular raters or clinical judges. These and many other similar methodological problems undoubtedly are sources of error and seriously limit the degree of consistency that can be observed (e.g., Block, 1968; Emmerich, 1969). An alternative interpretation, however--and one favored by a specificity theory of social behavior--is that the observed inconsistency so regularly found in studies of noncognitive personality dimensions reflect the inadequacy of the assumption of global dispositions and not merely the distortions of measurement.

The most common argument for personality consistency in the face of seeming behavioral inconsistency is the distinction between the phenotypic and the genotypic. Granted that overt behavior is not highly consistent, might it not be useful to posit genotypic personality dispositions that endure, although their overt response forms may change? This genotypic-phenotypic model has been at the crux of traditional trait and dynamic dispositional theories of personality. The utility of such an indirect "sign" approach to dispositions depends on the value of the inferences provided by the clinical judge. Consequently the reliability and validity of clinician's judgments becomes crucial. The empirical studies on this issue have investigated in detail the value of clinician's efforts to infer broad dispositions from specific symptomatic signs, and to unravel disguises in order to uncover the motivational dispositions that might be their roots. As is now widely known, the accumulated findings give little support for the utility of clinical judgments (e.g., Goldberg, 1968). Reviews of the

relevant research generally show that clinicians guided by concepts about underlying genotypic dispositions have not been able to predict behavior better than have the person's own direct self-report, simple indices of directly relevant past behavior, or demographic variables (e.g., Mischel, 1968, 1971).

Some Implications of Specificity Theory

The findings of the specificity of personality are easily misunderstood. These misunderstandings are evident in repeated critiques (e.g., Adelson, 1970; Alker, 1969; Craik, 1969; Dahlstrom, 1970) on applications of social behavior theory to the domain of personality, and particularly to the issue of the specificity of personality. The main thrust of these reactions is that social behavior theory's emphasis on the specificity of behavior implies a personality-less view of man. We are faced once again by the apparition of the empty organism, devoid of internal states and dispositions, and battered willy-nilly by the push and pull of stimulus conditions.

Common Misconceptions

Recognition of the relative specificity of behavior does not imply a person-free or personality-less psychology. It would be most unconstructive to re-invoke the old dichotomies of person versus situation or of consistency versus specificity. Surely no one can seriously doubt that there is some consistency in human behavior, and that what stimuli do to a person depends on who he is as well as on what the stimulus is. The impact of an experimenter's "social reinforcement," for example, presumably will differ if the subject is two years old or twenty, male or female, from Toledo, Ohio or from Peking. Hopefully it will also depend on subtler psychological and physiological attributes of the subject (for example whether he is anxious or distracted, hungry or sleepy) and on the other exact details of the specific situation.

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Thus it must be self-evident that behavior always involves the subject and the situation in almost inseparable interactions.

Specificity and Consistency in Behavior

The specificity found in behavior is not so great that we cannot recognize continuity in people. It is also not so great that we have to treat each new behavior from a person as if we never saw anything like it from him before. But the obtained specificity does remind us that what people do in any situation may be changed dramatically even by relatively trivial alterations in their prior experiences or by slight modifications in the particular features of the immediate situation. This utter dependence of behavior on the details of the specific conditions reflects the great subtlety of the discriminations that people continuously make. No student of behavior will be surprised to find that when the evoking and maintaining conditions for behavior change (as they so often do across situations) then the behavior itself will not remain stable. Conversely, when maintaining conditions do remain stable (for example with regard to the same behavior pattern in the same setting but at different times) then we may expect to attain some stability in the pattern of behavior. If one takes seriously the dependency of behavior on conditions, and recognizes that behavior changes when situations change, then behavioral specificity may be seen as a reflection of human discrimination and as quite congruent with results from experimental research on the determinants and modification of social behavior (Mischel, 1968). When maintaining conditions remain stable so does behavior; but when response consequences and valences change so do actions.

If reinforcement consequences for the performance of responses across situations are largely uncorrelated, the responses themselves should not be expected to covary strongly, as they indeed do not in most empirical studies.

When the probable reinforcing consequences for cheating or waiting, or working differ widely across situations depending on the particular task and circumstances, the behavior of others, the likelihood of detection, the probable consequences of being caught, the frustration induced, the value of success, etc., impressive generality will not be found.

Moderator Variables and Subject-condition Interactions

Several recent trait studies have investigated the relative separate quantitative contributions of persons and settings, as well as the variance accounted for by the interaction of the individual and the environment (e.g., Moos, 1968; 1969). The essential method consists of sampling the behavior (by observation and/or questionnaire) repeatedly across a series of situations and through various response modes. On the whole, these studies have indicated that the sampled individual differences, situations and response modes when considered separately tend to account for less variance than does their interaction. For example, Endler and his colleagues (Endler & Hunt, 1966, 1968; 1969 ; Endler, Hunt & Rosenstein, 1962) found that neither individual differences among subjects, nor the variations among situations (as described on a questionnaire) accounted for much of the variation in self-reported anxiety. In contrast, the mode of response and the interactions among subjects, situations and modes of response, contributed much more substantially to the total variance.

These provocative studies, with only one exception, (Moos, 1969) have been based on the subject's own self-report and hence are open to the same interpretative problems created by the use of all other self-reports (Mischel, 1968). One study (by Moos) was a notable exception; it included direct behavior observations. The behaviors, however, were confined to

such acts as hand and arm movements, foot and leg movements, scratching, picking, rubbing, smoking, and talking, whose relevance to traditional personality dispositions is far from clear.

Nevertheless it is encouraging that recent research on dispositions has started to recognize seriously the extraordinary complexity of the interactions found between subject variables and conditions. The concept of "moderator variables" was introduced to trait theory to refer to the fact that the effects of any particular disposition generally are moderated by such other variables as the subject's age, his sex, his I.Q., the experimenter's sex, and the characteristics of the situation (Wallach, 1962). When one examines closely the higher-order interactions obtained in research on the effects of dispositions and conditions, the number of moderator variables required to describe the results tends to be formidable. For example, to talk about a subject's voluntary delay of gratification, one may have to know how old he is, his sex, the experimenter's sex, the particular objects for which he is waiting, the consequences of not waiting, the models to whom he was just exposed, his immediately prior experience--the list gets almost endless. This seems to be another way of saying in the language of moderator variables and interaction terms that what a person does tends to be relatively specific to a host of controlling conditions, and that behavior is multiply determined by all these variables rather than being the product of global underlying dispositions. Trait-oriented psychologists may find these interpretations more pallatable if they are not phrased as reflecting the specificity of behavior patterns but rather as highlighting their uniqueness and complexity. To say that what a person thinks, and does, and feels--and hence what he is at any moment--depends on

a multitude of variables is also to underline the complexity and uniqueness of human behavior.

It would be wasteful to create pseudo controversies that pit persons against situations in order to see which is more important. The answer surely must always depend on the particular situations and persons sampled; presumably studies could be designed to demonstrate almost any outcome. Likewise, rather than argue about the existence of consistency it would be more constructive to analyze and study the conditions that seem to foster--and to undermine--the occurrence of consistency. Moreover, consistency involves not merely similarity in what a person does as interpreted by scientific observers but also similarity as it is construed by the actor himself and by the community. Hence it becomes important to study the conditions that lead to the impression of consistency and, indeed, to the construction or attribution of consistency even in the face of substantial behavioral specificity.

In sum, obviously behavior is not entirely situation-specific; we do not have to relearn everything in every new situation, we have memories, and our past predisposes our present behavior in critically important and complex ways. Obviously people have characteristics. Obviously the impact of any stimulus depends on the organism that experiences it. Obviously knowing how a person behaved before can help us predict how he will behave again in similar contexts. No one suggests that the organism approaches every new situation with an empty head, nor is it questioned by anyone that different individuals differ markedly in how they deal with most stimulus conditions. What has been questioned is the utility of inferring broad dispositions from behavioral signs as <u>the</u> bases for trying to explain the

phenomena of personality and for predicting human behavior. The available data do not imply that different people will not act differently with some consistency in different classes of situations; they do imply that the particular classes of conditions must be taken into account far more carefully than in the past and tend to be much narrower than traditional trait theories have assumed.

Evidence for the lack of utility of inferring hypothesized trait dispositions from behavioral signs should not be misread to imply that individual differences or subject variables are unimportant. The data do suggest that inferences about underlying traits and dispositions have less utility for most assessment efforts to predict individual behavior than do more economical, alternative analyses based on more direct data such as the person's past behavior in similar situations, his self-predicted behavior or his direct self-report.

I prefer to view the consistency issue in terms of the utility of inferring broad trait dispositions, not in terms of the more metaphysical question of the existence or validity of such dispositions. When the question is cast in terms of utility rather than validity, it becomes evident that the answer must depend on the particular objective or purpose for which the inference is made. For example, while global trait inferences may have little utility for the psychologist interested in the prediction of the subject's specific future behavior, they may have value for the subject himself--for instance, when he tries to answer such everyday questions as "what is your wife like?,--or "what is your psychotherapist like?", or "might this stranger lurking on the next corner be a murderer?", or "what are you like?" Similarly, an indictment of the relative lack of utility of

inferring broad dispositions for purposes of predicting the individual's behavior does not deny the utility of using such inferences for many other purposes--such as gross initial screening decisions or research into personality processes. In our research at Stanford, for example, my students and I are continuing to include subject measures as one of the variables so that the specific interaction of persons and conditions can be investigated.

But while it would be bizarre to suggest that there is no place for the subject in the psychology of personality it is also true that under many circumstances knowledge of just where the person is, psychologically, may tell us as much--or more--than does information about his attributes. In other words, behavior often may be predicted and controlled most efficaciously from knowledge about relevant stimulus conditions, especially when those conditions are powerful.

The potency of predictions based on knowledge of stimulus conditions is seen in many predictive studies, for example, regarding post-hospital prognosis for mental patients. Of special interest are studies which revealed that the type, as well as the severity, of psychiatric symptoms depended strikingly on whether the person was in the hospital or in the community (Ellsworth, Foster, Childers, Gilberg, & Kroeker, 1968). Moreover, accurat predictions of post-hospital adjustment hinge on knowledge of the environment in which the ex-patient will be living in the community--such as the availability of jobs and family support--rather than on his measured personality characteristics or in-hospital behavior (e.g., Fairweather, 1967). Similarly, when powerful treatments are developed--such as modeling and desensitization therapies for phobias--predictions about outcomes are far better when based on knowing the treatment to which the subject is

assigned than from measuring his generalized anxieties or inferring his other dispositions (e.g., Bandura, Blanchard & Ritter, 1969).

From Disposition to Behavior: The Social Behaviorist's Trip

Given the overall findings on specificity and on the complexity of the interactions between subject and situation, it seems reasonable to look more specifically at what the person does--rather than trying to infer what dispositions he has--and to focus on the functional relations between what he does and the psychological conditions of his life. Such a shift from inferring global dispositions to analyzing behavior requires sampling the behavior of interest, rather than trying to use it as a sign of broad underlying dispositions. What people do, of course, includes much more than motor acts and requires us to consider what they do in their heads and guts as well as with their hands and feet.

In the context of research, the question arises of what one can do with a personality dimension--such as delay of gratification for example--if one wants to study it behaviorally rather than as a sign of ego strength. The answer to this question from the viewpoint of social behavior theory is neither unique nor original: Namely, one seeks what controls and regulates the behavior and one studies how the behavior can be changed systematically. In other words we can study the disposition as a dependent variable rather than as an intrapsychic cause or as the subject's fixed position on our continuum.

As Heider (1958) has noted, in the psychology of common sense the subject goes quickly from act to internalized disposition. He sees a behavioral cue, like another person sitting on a chair facing a treat, and quickly may infer he must be delaying gratification or that he must have a

strong will, or high ego strength, or a puritan conscience. Our subject thus engages in a rapid common sense journey from act to disposition. That trip may have to be reversed in a science of personality. In that reversal one has to try to externalize the referents for the dispositions that subjects have internalized and attributed to themselves as permanent traits so that one can proceed to discover what controls them.

In spite of the repeated warnings about pseudo-explanations and explanatory fictions by Skinner and others (e.g., Skinner, 1953) it is hard to avoid the temptation (both in the clinic and in the laboratory) to use dispositional attributions like the layman does: to go, for example, from the observation of a sample of behavior in which a person seems to act impulsively to the assumption that impulsivity is his modal response and then to attribute to him an impulsive disposition. Thereafter his impulsive disposition is invoked both as a prediction and explanation of his future behavior.

In an experimental behavioral analysis, one externalizes his ideas about dispositions, puts them "out there" in behavioral terms, and proceeds to study what happens to those behaviors when one does things to them. In other words, one conducts functional analyses of the relations between changes in selected behavior patterns (samples of "impulsivity," for example) and changes in manipulated conditions. In such an approach to personality the unit of study shifts from inferences about dispositions, and correlations between the signs of those dispositions, to an analysis of behavior patterns in relation to the conditions that evoke, maintain, and modify those patterns. The focus shifts from attempting to generalize about what individuals "are like" to an assessment of what they do in relationship

to the conditions in which they do it. The focus shifts from describing situation-free people with broad trait adjectives to analyzing the observable causes of their behavior. Such a shift implies more attention to the processes that generate and regulate an individual's behavior (including self-moderated processes as in self-reinforcement) and less to inferences regarding the structure of hypothesized global dispositions.

In the clinical setting, of course, one has to help the client to externalize his own troublesome and problematic dispositions so that he can define them, discover what controls them, and try to change any of them that need changing if indeed he wants them changed. It may seem, at first glance, that any serious attention to the subject's phenomenology would be incompatible with a behavioral approach. That is not necessarily true. Skepticism about the utility of our psychological or professional constructs regarding the subject's broad dispositions in no way requires us to ignore our subject's constructs about his own dispositions. Psychologists are not the only people who are trait theorists: a distinctive feature of all our human subjects is that they also generate theories about themselves--and even about the psychologists who study them. They invoke traits and other dispositions as ways of describing and explaining their experience and themselves, just as professional psychologists do, and it would be strange if one tried to define out of existence the dispositional constructs and

other concepts, perceptions and experiences, of the people whom we are studying. Indeed these phenomena can be studied like any other complex phenomena--if appropriate observable referents are found for them. A large part of the clinician's task (and perhaps the most challenging) is to help the client in the search for such referents for his own constructs, instead of supplying him with our favorite dispositional labels. Rather than leading the client to repackage his problems in our terms, and with our constructs, we need to help him to objectify his constructs into behavioral terms, so that the relevant behaviors can be changed by helping him to achieve more judicious arrangements of the conditions in his life.

Social behavior assessments do not label the individual with generalized trait terms, sort him into diagnostic or type categories, pinpoint his average position on average or modal dimensions, or guess about his private reasons and motives (Mischel, 1968). Instead the focus is on sampling and elaborating the individual's relevant cognitions and behaviors in relation to the conditions that covary with them. Thus, behavioral assessment includes an exploration of the unique or idiographic features of the individual, perhaps to a greater extent than other approaches. Social behavior theory recognizes the individuality of each person and of each unique situation. This is a curious feature when one considers the "mechanistic S-R" stereotypes not infrequently attached by critics to behavioral analyses. Assessing the acquired meaning of stimuli is the core of social behavior assessment, and it is inextricably linked with behavior change. Indeed an appropriate behavior change program tries to modify what stimuli do to the person--and what he does to stimuli--by rearranging with the

person the conditions that regulate these outcomes, including the ways in which the person reacts to himself.

An emphasis on the role of stimulus conditions (or in other terms, on the role of situational moderator variables) in the regulation of behavior is easily misconstrued to imply a passive view of man and distorted into an image of an empty organism filled at most by psychological glue that bonds response bundles automatically to stimuli impinging from the outside world. It is true that behavioral analyses focus on the exact covariations between changing conditions and the individual's changing behavior. But while conditions may come to regulate the person's behavior, it is the individual--not the stimulus, or the situation, or the moderator--that is alive and that does the acting. Only organisms, not stimuli or conditions, are capable of responding. A focus on stimuli is interesting only in so far as it helps us to understand the person and to help him change--hopefully for the better.

From Behavior to Disposition: The Subject's Trip

Although some contemporary personality psychologists might want to put a voluntary freeze on the invention of personality dispositions it is unlikely that our subjects will comply. While the behavior analyst is busily going from disposition to behavior, most people whether we like it or not, continue their trip in the opposite direction, going from behavior to disposition; they seem to function like old-fashioned trait theorists who never heard of neobehaviorism and think that operational definitions

might be what surgeons discuss. Thus while behavior often may be highly situation specific, it seems equally true that in daily life people tend to construe each other as if they were highly consistent, constructing consistent personalities even on the basis of relatively inconsistent behavioral fragments.

For the last few years, my students and I at Stanford have been studying the determinants of how long preschool children will actually sit still alone in a chair waiting for a preferred but delayed outcome (such as a large marshmallow) before they signal with a bell to terminate the waiting period and settle for a less preferred but immediately available gratification (a tiny pretzel, for example). We have been finding that the same 3 1/2 year old child who on one occasion may terminate his waiting in less than half a minute may be capable of waiting by himself up to an hour on another occasion a few weeks earlier or later, <u>if</u> cognitive and attentional conditions are appropriately arranged (Mischel, Ebbesen, & Raskoff, 1971). Gradually the results are permitting us to achieve considerable control over delay behavior. For example if the child has been instructed to focus cognitively on the consummatory qualities of the reward objects, such as the pretzel's taste and texture, he will be unable to wait for more than a few seconds. But if he cognitively transforms the stimulus--for example by thinking about the pretzel sticks as little logs, he can wait much longer

than our graduate student experimenters.

In these studies we sometimes let the subjects' mothers watch their youngsters through the one-way glass. As the child started to sit before the bell, staring at his pretzels or at a blank table, the mother usually was sure that she could predict how long or how little her child would wait. She knew how impulsive, or patient, or restless, or wild, her little youngster was--and was amazed to see her predictions vividly disconfirmed.

I knew from our research that the child's behavior would depend on such situational variables as whether or not the marshmallow was in front of the child, and the specific cognitive and attentional conditions induced by our instructions and experimental manipulations. I knew, moreover, that in our studies the main effects from the stimulus manipulations account for most of the variance whereas individual differences, assessed from a measure of the child's general disposition to delay gratification, account for only a very minor percentage. When my own four-year-old daughter served as a subject in the study, however, my own convictions about her consistent personality prevailed in my private prediction. Moreover, observing the fact that my prediction proved wrong was not about to change my subjective convictions. I don't think that is idiosyncratic.

The facts of behavioral specificity seem to coexist with the common impression that people have consistent dispositions that characterize them pervasively. In daily person-perception people seem to freely endow each other with global dispositions. An adequate approach to personality must reconcile the data on the relative specificity of behavior with the popular impression of pervasive consistency in personality. This discrepancy may reflect that people go rapidly beyond the observation of <u>some</u>

consistency which does exist in behavior to the attribution of greater perceived consistencies which they construct. As long ago as 1924, Hans Vaihinger in his book The philosophy of "as if" suggested that to prevent drowning in a world of facts men invent fictions about each other--and then behave "as if" they were real. But these fictions--like most good fiction--are not sheer fantasies unrelated to the events and behaviors of real life: on the contrary, they are rooted in life but go far beyond the facts.

How is the impression of consistency generated and maintained in the face of behavioral specificity? Many of the possible reasons for the construction of consistency have been reviewed elsewhere (Mischel, 1968) and a few major examples must suffice here.

First, research on impression-formation in person perception and in clinical judgment, on dissonance reduction and the maintenance of attitudes, and on cognitive sets guiding selective attention all suggest that subjects often generate construction systems rapidly and on the basis of minimal information. After they have spun their "theories" they may adhere to them tenaciously even in the face of inconsistent, seemingly disconfirming data by reducing the discrepancies post hoc (Mischel, 1968, 1969, 1971).

When human judges rate attributes from memory (especially from long term memory) there is a substantial distortion or bias in the direction of their pre-existing cognitive structure. Roy D'Andrade (1970) found, for example, that correlations between ratings based on long term memory were "similar to judgments about how much alike the terms for these traits are in meaning, but quite different than correlations for these same behaviors which are based on data using the immediate recording

of on going interaction" (D'Andrade, 1970, p. 1). In his words:

> ...there is a systematic distortion in such judgments, in that traits which the observer considers similar will be recalled as applying to the same person, even when this is not the case. As a result of this effect, the correlations found between traits turn out to be due more to the observer's conception of 'what is like what' than to covariation in the behavior of the subjects.

There are many intriguing tactics for preserving the impression of consistency. In a series of studies conducted by Teresa Osborne at Stanford recently we have been finding, for example, that initial observations easily lead to the attribution of "deep" or motivating traits in the observed person: Thereafter these inferred motivating traits bias the observer's subsequent attributions towards consistency. For example, after an observer has diagnosed another person as "aggressive" (and he does that very quickly and on the basis of few facts), if he is faced by new inconsistent behavior he is likely to dismiss it as due to external or situational variables and to factors other than the persons "real" or "true" self. The naive subject thus shares the psychoanalyst's phenotypic-genotypic motivational analysis. Like the analyst, he can reconstrue, and dismiss all sorts of discrepant behavior from the person as if they were merely "superficially" incongruent but "fundamentally" or "basically" compatible with his genuine self. And, like the analyst, his analyses may become seriously biased toward the perpetuation of consistent stereotypes about others. He puts his terms on the other, and then construes the other's behavior to make it fit his labels. The price of such cognitive neatness, unfortunately, may be the perpetuation

of rigid stereotypes with dubious behavioral consequences. In this fashion we may be perpetuating the comforting notion that we live in a simple, neat world of consistent personalities; but we may be sacrificing accuracy and specific prediction while deluding ourselves with the spurious sense of order achieved from post-hoc analyses and post-diction.

The over-attribution of consistency may be something we do unto others more than to ourselves. In some intriguing recent research and theorizing Jones and Nisbett (1971) consider how people explain the causes of such behaviors as tripping over feet or placing bumper stickers on their car. Jones and Nisbett note that when explaining <u>other</u> people's behavior we invoke their consistent personality dispositions: Steve is the sort of person who puts bumper stickers on his car; Jill tripped because she's clumsy. But when asked to explain our <u>own</u> behavior we consider specific conditions: "AAA sent me this catchy bumper sticker in the mail" or "I tripped because it was dark." Thus Jones and Nisbett (1971, p. 58) on the basis of some promising preliminary data theorize that "actors tend to attribute the causes of their behavior to stimuli inherent in the situation while observers tend to attribute behavior to stable dispositions of the actor." Jones and Nisbett analyze many possible reasons for this seemingly paradoxical state of affairs, including the tendency to treat every sample of behavior we observe from another person as if it were modal or typical for him. It thus seems as if traits may be the consistent attributes that <u>other</u> people have. Perhaps we function like trait theorists when analyzing <u>other</u> people, but more like social behaviorists when we try to understand ourselves. If so, there may be a warning here for clinicians: do we pin our clients with consistent dispositional labels and trait

explanations more than we do ourselves?

Congruent with Jones and Nisbett are Kenneth Gergen's (1968) recent findings regarding the so-called "self-concept." His detailed studies reveal that, contrary to the popular belief, when it comes to their self-perceptions people do not have a consistent, unitary self-concept. Indeed, he concludes with regard to the phenomena of self-concepts that inconsistency, rather than consistency, seems to be the natural state of affairs.

We probably could not escape trait terms even if we wanted to. But that does not mean that our trait concepts are either adequate or useful or sufficient explanations of our behavior. A distinctive characteristic of man may be that in addition to emitting actions he construes them. Traits are fictions that may have value when our purpose is global labeling e.g., to help us evaluate people, to categorize people out of the way, so that we can label them and "file" them in long-term (very long term) memory storage. But if the purpose is to predict specific behavior in specific situations the trait label is likely to be of less use. An indictment of traits for purposes of analyzing behavior in no way diminishes their possible utility (and hazards) for other purposes. Men function both as behaviorists and as trait theorists, and presumably the value of each of these activities depends, in part at least, on the individual's objective or task at the moment. The study of traits may ultimately teach us more about the cognitive activity of the trait theorist than about the causes of behavior--but such findings would be of great value in their own right. In spite of many references to the "implicit personality theory" of the layman, most questions remain largely unanswered.

How do traits function for the layman? Do they serve him well? For what might they be useful: Prediction? Post-hoc explanation? Communication? Mnemonic aids to help him group and remember more behavior than he could otherwise process? In common sense psychology, when--if ever--does the person analyze behavior x condition interactions? When is he most likely to attribute consistent dispositions? How does he generate the impression of consistency, rendering diverse behaviors functionally equivalent? Obviously he does that with the aid of semantic labels; but just how does that process work? Would predictions about his behavior improve if we based them on his equivalence labels rather than on our own constructions? How do people handicap and impale themselves behaviorally with their own constructed consistencies?

Perhaps, as Daryl Bem (1971) notes after a review of relevant social psychological literature on attribution and consistency, it is time to abandon the assumption (so prevalent till now) that everything is glued together; perhaps it is time instead to seriously entertain the hypothesis that nothing is glued together until proved otherwise. A main challenge here would be to decipher when and how the gluing occurs; then consistent personality dispositions may begin to be understood as active constructions by our subjects rather than as accurate explanations of their behavior.

A personality psychology that emphasizes variability and change in behavior, rather than consistency in dispositions, is readily misinterpreted as an attack on personality because the notion of pervasive consistency has been defined into the concept itself. But we might find a richer conception of personality if we complicated the concept even more to include basic inconsistencies across settings and over time as part of

the phenomena to be understood. Such an enlarged conceptualization of personality would have to include a place for man's tendency to invent personality theories and to adhere to them, as well as for the fact that his behavior can be brought under stimulus control.

Footnote

[1]In social psychology, the "attitude" has been the unit endowed with properties parallel to those assigned to the trait in the field of personality.

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